

1970

# View from the Cheap Seats: A Look at Today's Musical Theatre

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## Recommended Citation

Green, Wayne, "View from the Cheap Seats: A Look at Today's Musical Theatre" (1970). *Honors Theses*. 458.  
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VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS:  
A Look at Today's Musical Theatre

by  
Wayne Green

In fulfillment of the requirements  
for Special Studies in the Honors Program

H 791  
(1 hr.)

January 20, 1970

D. Holt

1/22/70

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I might begin by making it clear that this is not a research paper in the regular sense of the phrase. My hours of preparation were eagerly spent in the mezzanine seats of various On- and Off-Broadway playhouses, or when time would permit and funds would not, in the standing room sections thereof, peering over the last row of orchestra seats. Each of the musical comedies I attended, seven in all, held a singular fascination for me. It seems a shame to disassemble them now in order to discover what made them tick, but that, after all, is the purpose of this paper.

As is true in any written art form, the writer must begin with an idea, which in this case must lend itself to expression in terms of music. Just what determines whether an idea can or cannot be successfully conveyed in musical form is a matter of some question and which I am in no way qualified to discuss.

It seems that most musical comedy writers are afraid of not basing such an expensive effort on a script that has profited in another form. However, the acknowledgment in the playbill, such as "Suggested by Twelfth Night", is frequently the extent of the resemblance. About the only aspects of that Shakespearean comedy that remain in the rock musical Your Own Thing are character names, a few couplets, and plot gimmick of who's-what-sex. And I fail utterly to see the reason for basing Cabaret on John Van Druten's I Am a Camera. It's like

saying I am a "spittin' image" of my dad just because we both have big noses, when he may be half as tall and twice as big around as I am. There are, of course, exceptions: Mame is remarkably true to the play by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, probably because they wrote both. And, begging Mr. Wilder's pardon if I am wrong, Hello Dolly seems to be reasonably faithful to the plotlines and dialogue of The Matchmaker. One of my very favorite musicals, Promises Promises, got its beginnings on the silver screen a few years ago in the Academy Award winner, The Apartment.

Occasionally there emerges one in which the idea is at least half original. 1776 is a delightful compromise between history and the rampant imagination of Sherman Edwards (When one is dealing with Independence, he can take a few liberties). Coco stems rather loosely from the life and career of Gabrielle (Coco) Chanel, the world-famous couturiere and perfumer. The latter is a prime example, I believe, of a case in which it was a mistake to add the music. A former voice teacher of mine defined singing as the emotionalization of speech, and Coco's plot is too feeble to scale any emotional peak whatsoever. The reader might come back with the argument that the tribal rock musical Hair is completely devoid of plot, but in my opinion the music of Hair is its sole reason for being, and Coco doesn't even have that going for it. Its songs are almost as memorable as its story line.

That brings us around to the author's next consideration. After the idea and the script comes the score. Perhaps it is unfair to compare the unfamiliar music of Coco to the songs of Mame and Hello Dolly, which I could spout off almost in tune and missing only a few words before I even saw the shows. Who is to say whether the music in a show is right or wrong? You may have listened to a show tune on the radio and said, "Hey, that's a great song", when actually in the context of the show it served no purpose whatsoever. Haven't you ever been sitting comfortably in a theatre when an actor suddenly burst into song for no apparent reason? You get the idea that the author just thought it was time for another song. I believe I can be reasonably safe in making the premise that the songs should be an integral part of the action, the characterization, the entire fabric of the play, and the scores of several of the shows I saw succeeded beautifully in this. The rhythmic uptown sound of Bacharach fit neatly into the pages of Promises Promises in its fast-paced, big-city brilliance. The rock music of Your Own Thing was perfectly in keeping with its long-haired, bell-bottomed tribe of characters. And 1776, my favorite score, combined the elegance of harpsichordic, fife-and-drum period music with a uniquely fresh and modern sound. It also has numbers which confirm the rumor that the American musical theatre may be returning to Vaudeville. 1776 is an instance in which I loved the score the first time I heard

With script and score tucked neatly under his arm, the writer now faces the problem of casting. Of course, there are instances in which the whole show is a star vehicle. I don't think the creators of Coco ever tried to keep it a secret that they were concocting a showcase to reaffirm the wonderful talents of Katharine Hepburn, one of which, I might add, singing is not. And just to show how concerned was the public that Miss Hepburn has a voice comparable only to a sandstorm, the show was sold out for two years before it opened.

It seems that the vast majority of musical comedy stars are, strangely enough, not singers but personalities. The role of Dolly Levi, written for a soprano, took shape in the bawdy baritone voice of Carol Channing, and the choice of Angela Lansbury, who has never claimed to be a singer, for Mame was a surprise to the whole theatre industry. However, there are shows in which the musical score makes calculated demands on the vocal talents of its performers. The players in Promises Promises must have well-trained voices and keen senses of rhythm in order to keep in step with the difficult melodies characteristic of the Bacharach style.

The players, once chosen, must then be planted on the stage within the bounds of some sort of set. Since I am by no means well-versed enough to analyze or criticize the technical aspects of the musical theatre, I can only relate the obvious. The most intricate stage setting I saw was that of

Hello Dolly. There were about fifteen scenes, each entirely different. There must have been at least ten drops and twice as many trucks, and at one point a large three-dimensional train carried the entire cast off into the wings. Most sets are much more simplified than this. The action of Mame took place on and around a huge spiral staircase looming center stage. Your Own Thing was housed in an arrangement of five screens on which the faces of such celebrities as John Wayne, Valentino, Shirley Temple, Pope Paul, Buddha, and Queen Elizabeth I were projected and from which each commented candidly on the subject at hand. The playbill of 1776 reads, "A single setting represents the Chamber and an anteroom of the Continental Congress, a Mall, High Street, and Thomas Jefferson's room, in Philadelphia; and certain reaches of John Adams' mind." The triple setting of Coco is constructed on a massive turntable which revolves at will to follow the characters from room to room. One critic commented, "Indeed there were times when everything seemed to be on the move except the plot."

Thus, we have followed the hatching of a musical through the eyes of inexperience. But one thing is sure: Creating a musical is an ambitious task, and a dangerous one, too. For the artist runs the risk of being criticized by someone who knows as little about the musical theatre as I and someone who cares as little about it as the critics.